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AUTHOR	Ysseldyke, James E.; Thurlow, Martha
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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities have been excluded to an unreasonable extent from large-scale assessment programs at the national, state, and local levels. One implication of this exclusion practice is that students who are left out of assessments tend not to be considered during reform efforts. Another implication is that estimates of performance are not comparable among states because of differential participation rates. Many factors underlie the exclusion of students with disabilities from large-scale assessments, including: (1) the use of vague guidelines, (2) the differential implementation of guidelines, (3) failure to monitor the assessment, (4) sampling plans that systematically exclude students, (5) unwillingness to make accommodations in assessment procedures and materials, and (6) an altruistic motivation to lessen the emotional distress of students not expected to perform well. Recommendations are proposed for large-scale assessment programs to include students with disabilities, to make accommodations and adaptations, and to monitor how well the intent of the guidelines is followed. (JDD)

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ED 372 560

NCEO POLICY DIRECTIONS

Number 1

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Guidelines for Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in Large-Scale Assessments

Background

Students with disabilities have been excluded to an unreasonable extent from large-scale assessment programs at the national, state, and local levels. Large-scale assessment programs of note include the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP), considered to be the nation's "report card," state assessment programs, and school district assessments that are used to describe the performance of all students in a given location (the nation, a state, or a school district).

One implication of this exclusion practice is that students who are left out of assessments tend not to be considered during reform efforts. Another is that estimates of performance for states on such assessments as NAEP are not comparable because of differential participation rates. The 1990 and 1992 Trial State NAEP exclusion rates range from 33 percent to 87 percent of students with disabilities.

EC 303192

The following guideline used by NAEP has been adopted by many states for their assessment programs. It reads:

Students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) may be excluded if "The student is mainstreamed less than 50 percent of the time in academic subjects and is judged to be incapable of taking part in the assessment, or the IEP team has determined that the student is incapable of taking part meaningfully in the assessment."

This guideline now has been the target of much criticism. But, of course, the guideline is not the sole source of exclusion. There are actually many factors that underlie the exclusion of students with disabilities from large-scale assessments. They include:

- The use of **vague guidelines** that allow local decisions to be made about the participation of students who are on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
- The **differential implementation** of guidelines
- The **failure to monitor** the extent to which the intent of the guidelines is followed
- **Sampling plans** that systematically exclude students who are in separate schools and students who are not in graded programs
- An **unwillingness to make accommodations** in assessment materials and procedures that will enable some individuals to participate
- An **altruistic motivation** to lessen the emotional distress to the student who is not expected to perform well.

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Develop Guidelines

An underlying premise is that large-scale assessment programs should include as many students with disabilities as possible without destroying desired technical characteristics, given the purpose of the assessment. A consistent set of guidelines is needed. It should have three components:

- **Guidelines for inclusion**
- **Guidelines for accommodations and adaptations**
- **Monitoring system to ensure adherence to guidelines**

Alternatives

Not all large-scale assessment programs use the same approach for including students with disabilities. States, in particular, vary considerably in both the guidelines for making decisions about the participation of students with disabilities and for determining what accommodations and adaptations are used during assessments.

Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Some rely too strongly on the opinion of one or more individuals whose opinions may be biased by unrelated issues. Others are too arbitrary, and not linked to the way students are currently served in schools.

It is possible that legal issues could make some options problematic. For example, if a large-scale assessment has consequences for the student, issues of access and accommodations will have to be addressed.

Other considerations impinge on these alternatives as well. For example, many large-scale assessment programs do not make adequate differentiations of student performance at the lower end of performance. With the inclusion of more students who typically have performed at the lower end of the scale on large-scale assessments, there will be a need for greater differentiation at this lower end. All of these factors in interaction must be considered when selecting the best approach.

Recommendations

Based on interactions with numerous policymakers, assessment personnel, and disability advocates, the following guidelines are recommended for large-scale assessment programs to use when including students with disabilities in their assessments.

▶ *Inclusion*

Including students with disabilities in large-scale assessments needs to occur at three points:

1. Instrument Development
Include students with disabilities when trying out items. This will help to identify problems and the need for less difficult items. Instruments can be dropped, modified, or added during this development phase to allow greater numbers of students with disabilities to participate meaningfully.

2. Instrument Administration
Include all students with disabilities in taking some form of the assessment. When a sampling procedure is used for an assessment, the sample must be representative of **all** students.

- **Allow partial participation in an assessment**. Some assessments have components that could be completed by an informed respondent. Include students with disabilities in these components, even if they cannot respond to other components.

- **Use an alternative assessment for some students**. For a small percentage (up to 2%) of the student population or the population sample, have them participate in an assessment that is developed as an alternative to the regular assessment. These students should be those with the most severe cognitive disabilities. To set up an alternative accountability system for these students, require school personnel to complete a form asking for functioning level information beyond that typically required on "excluded student" forms in large-scale assessments.

3. Reporting Results
Data on the performance of **all** students, including students with disabilities, are needed and therefore, scores must be reported. Reports should include results from students taking alternative assessments and information from informed respondents. If a student is

excluded from testing for any reason, that student should be given a score of zero.

▶ *Accommodations and Adaptations*

Not all students with disabilities will need accommodations during assessments. But modifications in assessments should be used when needed to increase the number of students with disabilities who can take tests. Accommodations and adaptations that teachers currently use with students during instruction and that are permitted by society should be used during assessments. Initially, it is possible to use modifications that:

- **Make a student more comfortable and secure in the test setting** (For instance, use carrels and separate room administrations.)

- **Do not destroy the validity of measures** (For example, use amplification, magnification, large print version, Braille version, augmentative communication, sign language, or a word processor.)

Other modifications that may raise questions about the technical characteristics of measures should be studied. Other types of accommodations and adaptations include:

Presentation alternatives — audiocassette, oral administration
Response alternatives — dictate to scribe, Braille writer
Setting alternatives — individual administration, hospital administration
Scheduling alternatives — extended time, multiple test sessions

As new technologies and procedures for accommodations and adaptations are developed, they should be included in the possible accommodations and adaptations for instruction and testing.

▶ *Monitoring*

Monitoring how well the intent of the guidelines is followed should be done so that no student is excluded who could participate with accommodations and adaptations. This can be accomplished by requiring a specific person in the district to sign off for each student who does not participate in the regular assessment and by having the student complete an alternative assessment. Or, someone can provide information about the student. Other possibilities include the following:

- **Conduct follow-up studies of excluded students** to verify that these students could not participate in the assessment with reasonable modifications, and report the results of the follow-up studies.

- **Remove incentives for exclusion** by assigning zero scores to all students who are excluded from assessments.

- **Set up a panel to review requests for new forms of testing modifications** so that decisions can be made about the reasonableness of the requested modifications, or about the need for research. ▲

Resources

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NCEO Policy Directions are a series of reports that address national policy issues related to students with disabilities. This report was prepared by Jim Ysseldyke and Martha Thurlow, with input from many individuals.

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Publications Office
NCEO
350 Elliott Hall
75 East River Road
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Minneapolis, MN 55455

About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), established in 1990, works with state departments of education, national policy-making groups, and others to facilitate and enrich the development and use of indicators of educational outcomes for students with disabilities. It is believed that responsible use of such indicators will enable students with disabilities to achieve better results from their educational experiences.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, and St. Cloud State University.

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NCEO Staff

Robert H. Bruininks
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